

JOHANNES BRAHMS . TRIO FOR PIANO VIOLIN & HORN . IN E FLAT MAJOR . OPUS 40

ARTHUR GRUMIAUX . VIOLIN . GREGORY TUCKER . PIANO . JAMES STAGLIANO . FRENCH HORN

B-209



WENZEL STICH (GENERAL PUNTO) . QUARTET IN F FOR HORN AND STRINGS

JAMES STAGLIANO, HORN . RUTH POSSELT, VIOLIN . JOSEPH DE PASQUALE, VIOLA . SAMUEL MAYES, CELLO

BOSTON RECORDS

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# BRAHMS

Andante — Poco più animato  
 Scherzo: Allegro — Molto meno allegro  
 Adagio mesto  
 Finale: Allegro con brio

That Brahms played the piano, and very well too, is widely known. Yet few are aware that in his youth he also played the French horn. How he understood it, how he loved it — for its closeness to nature, its apparently innate romanticism — is clear from every instance where he employed it. But nowhere else but in his Opus 40, written in 1865 when he was 32, did he compose an entire work "round the horn", in the words of Edwin Evans, Sr., music which seems to express everything that is right with that intractable and marvelous instrument, and nothing that is wrong with it.

Supposedly, Brahms conceived the idea for the Horn Trio near a specific spot in the forested Lichtenthal hills above Baden-Baden, in the *Schwarzwald*. Thus there was another reason why the composer asked unequivocally for the *Waldhorn*, the valve-less "forest" horn or *cor-de-chasse*, which was severely limited in chromatic technique but unusually clear and robust in tone color. Now, it must be recalled that Brahms was a conservative among romanticists; if the old hunting-horn was good enough for Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, he did not feel that he had to join such revolutionaries as Berlioz and Wagner in their quest for the latest instrumental improvements and innovations. Furthermore, in 1865, the valve-horn had not reached the constructional perfection it has today. It is very likely, however, that if Brahms had envisioned the unequalled mellowness, warmth, and flexibility of the modern instrument, he would have relaxed his strictures. The great horn players of our time frankly feel that the labor of remastering the "natural" horn is not justified by the tonal results, and that the blend with other instruments is actually smoother when the modern instrument is used. The case of the clarinet or flute is not so vastly different, thanks to the inventions of Boehm.

After the first performance on December 7, 1865, at Karlsruhe, Brahms recognized that master-hornists would be in short supply. He permitted his publisher, Simrock, to issue also alternate parts for violoncello and viola. The latter he much preferred, considering the cello "dreadful" as a substitute. But what he really wanted was the horn, and his achievement in blending the three oddly-matched instruments into one flawless texture is admirable. The work is chamber music at its finest — while it remains horn music, written with the feeling and meaning of that instrument at the source of every theme. The violin part is unusually low in range; the texture of the piano is most carefully designed in spacing and register, rich but always lucid. All contributes to an atmosphere of quiet melancholy, a distinct restraint even in the fast movements. The horn never dominates, never becomes a star soloist — it only imbues its associates with its own unique musical personality.

From the standpoint of form, too, the Horn Trio is unusual. "To accentuate the natural and simple character of this work," writes the great scholar Karl Geiringer, "Brahms even resigns the sonata form (the only instance of the kind among his instrumental pieces in several movements)." Thus the first movement is more akin to the rondo design, with the calm *Andante* of the opening, marked *dolce espressivo*, recurring twice more, separated by sections headed *poco più animato*, in which the violin is more prominent, the music more emotionally agitated. The atmosphere of the movement is one of warmest intimacy, a sense of romantic contemplation and longing. There is no attempt at competition between the participants; violin and horn often speak together, in harmony, in agreement, at moments allowing each other preference of theme and idea, as at the two transitions to the *Andante*.

The subject of the Scherzo, as propounded by the piano, is unmistakably a "horn theme". Most exciting are the alternations of triple and duple meter, instances of the composer's vigorous rhythmic thinking. How memorable are the syncopations that arise from the first few notes of the opening subject, the sweeping tune sung by the horn! For a Trio, Brahms writes a *molto meno allegro*, music of extreme seriousness, a sequential squareness almost obsessive. We are reminded of a similarly gloomy trio in Schubert's C major String Quintet, in the center of an equally ebullient scherzo.

The slow movement is an *Adagio mesto* in E-flat minor. *Mesto* means mournful, and we know that the music embodies a lament over the death of the composer's mother early in 1865 (there was to be a later memorial to her in the fifth movement of the *Requiem*). This is music perhaps unsurpassed in all of Brahms' output for sustained somberness and depth in a very limited scope; it belongs to his most moving pages, and its simplicity of form allows the emotional message to gain full expression. There are but two subjects: the first a series of quietly grieving phrases, the second a haunting melody of unusual rhythmic cast. From their combination develops a texture of genuine pathos. Toward the close, there occurs a phrase in the major which is new and somehow consoling, a vision that touches the heart; but in a moment, we are thrown back into a *passionato* passage and an almost despairing close.

As the *Allegro con brio* finale opens, we suddenly comprehend the meaning of the visionary phrase in the *Adagio*: it had been, as Dr. Geiringer puts it, "an exquisite promise", an advance announcement of the finale theme itself, subtly connecting the movements. Here is true hunting music for our "cor de chasse", appropriate to one of the horn's characteristic outdoor pursuits. The design approaches that of the *sonata-allegro*, with a development section and recapitulation. The themes themselves are impossible to describe in words — as good melodies usually are; one can only say that they are uniformly inspired, exuberant yet always controlled, full of youth but also of wise maturity.

"Only those who know of the numerous obligations devolving upon the composer of a work of this kind," writes Evans, "can sufficiently admire the masterly way in which they have been fulfilled." True, perhaps; yet there is something more important than respect for technical conquest and craftsmanship: by those who are really familiar with it, the Horn Trio is held in the most sincere and lasting affection.

Allegro  
 Larghetto  
 Presto

Good music for virtuosos is not uncommon. Good music by virtuosos is a rarity. Some great composers, of course (like Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Bruckner, Bartók, Hindemith), have been superb instrumentalists. But those who were players first and foremost — like Paganini, Paderewski, Godowsky — are almost always also-rans as composers. Only once in a while have they produced a piece that has won the battle for survival. We cannot claim to know more than a vanishingly small percentage of the voluminous compositions by Giovanni Punto, but if our present example indicates his usual standard, we should feel that here is a neglected composer worth some fresh investigation.

Like many executants of transcendent ability, Punto lived an extraordinary life. He was born Jan Vaclav Stich at an unpronounceable and unspellable place in Bohemia in 1748, a wholly owned serf of Count Josef Thun. His obvious talent made it possible for him to study at Prague, Munich, and Dresden, before returning to his master's service. It seems that after three years of musical serfdom he literally escaped to the West; the needle-point meaning of his Czech-German name was changed to Punto, the Jan became Giovanni. He turned into a traveling virtuoso, and soon became known as the outstanding horn player of his era, the later 18th century. Mozart, whom he met in Paris in 1778, wrote music for him and some of his colleagues (the *Sinfonia Concertante* for Woodwinds and Orchestra, K-Appendix 9), and thought most highly of his abilities. In London, Punto's "taste and astonishing execution" were praised, and after many different engagements he found himself Citoyen Punto in Paris, violinist-conductor at the Théâtre des Variétés Amusantes in the middle of the *amusement* French Revolution, between 1789 and 1799. Keeping his head, he went to Vienna in 1800, and played — with the composer at the piano — the Horn Sonata Op. 17, especially written for him by Beethoven. By then emancipated, he could safely return to Bohemia, reaping acclaim and income. He died at Prague in 1803, and Mozart's *Requiem* was played at his funeral services — a good deal more than had been done for Mozart.

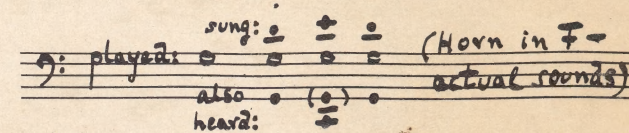
Punto's playing of the natural, valve-less horn, was prodigious.

The difficulties of producing tones by lip and hand alone, with insertion of lengthening crooks the only mechanical aid, were as nothing before his technique. A Prague critic of 1801 referred to his "unparalleled mastery . . ." and said that "his phrasing was always entirely vocal both in the upper and lower registers . . . His variations contained musical effects that were entirely novel, and his playing enriches our fatherland . . ." Another writer pointed to "the purity of his interpretation and the delicacy of his taste no less than his dynamic control, variety of tone-color and amazing articulation . . . His tone had a quality of silvery brightness that was foreign to any of his predecessors." The horn Punto used was actually of silver, a so-called *cor-solo* made by the noted builder J. Raoux.

Among his surviving works are a number of remarkable and still useful exercises and methods, as well as many compositions — most of which feature the horn. Now, one would expect in his own music a kind of flamboyant display of his instrument, an emphasis on his technical prowess with a rather retiring accompaniment. Maybe there are such pieces in his output; but the present work is a surprise: it is genuine chamber music, with all participants gainfully employed. The music is interesting to play, not only for the hornist. The wind instrument is gracefully integrated with the texture, rising from it at times for the usual cadenzas, and always supplying its particular color with taste and charm, eschewing ostentation. Punto, it seems, had listened well to Mozart; some of this music is worthy of the master himself.

Devotees of Mozart's "A Musical Joke" may be reminded of its memorable sonority as the F major *Allegro* opens, but it soon becomes apparent that Punto was no bungler. The simple sonata-form movement is refined as well as melodious; the sections are clearly marked off, with both the exposition and the development repeated. The horn gets sufficient rest, and its brief soloistic passages sound all the more effective for it.

The lovely *cantabile* melody of the C major *Larghetto* shows the composer's affinity to folk-song, his spontaneous lyricism and gentility. Quite dramatic, almost Beethovenian in promise, is the middle section in C minor, though it is almost immediately abandoned for a return of the first material. At its close enters the typical cadenza announcement, after which the soloist was and is expected to supply his own music. Mr. Stagliano's striking solution takes him up to high G (sound), and to A-flat at one point, in passages of appropriateness and wit. Noteworthy is the end of the cadenza, in which an ancient horn device is put to use. The listener will hear actual chords from the solo horn, two of three notes, and one of four. This "impossibility" becomes possible by humming one note while playing another. "If the intervals played and sung are suitable," *Grove's* informs us, "differential and summational tones are generated and a chord becomes audible." Here is what happens, best shown in a musical example:



If this seems like nothing more than a comical trick, let it be remembered that Punto himself "would introduce double and even triple chords in rapid or slow cadenzas," as several writers report. The whole thing is a bit of applied acoustics, and a musically valid one.

The F major finale is a sort of abbreviated rondo in contradance tempo. The delectable horseman theme would have pleased Schumann himself. Note the witty trills on the offbeats, the masterly writing also for the strings in the subsidiary section in B-flat, the fine lyrical touches of the violin line as well as the jaunty jumping-about of the horn. The work ends as pure chamber-music, full of the true spirit of give-and-take, an example of virtuoso gifts applied in creative art with rare discretion and distinction of style.

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JAMES STAGLIANO, Horn  
GREGORY TUCKER, Piano

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